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2000

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Eicher, Joanne B., "Discussion of Panel "Textile Tradition and Fashion in the Context of Globalization"" (2000). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 784.
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Discussion of Panel “Textile Tradition and Fashion in the Context of Globalization”

By Joanne B. Eicher, University of Minnesota

The papers by Hazel Lutz, Heather Akou, and Cathy Daly raise several overlapping issues that bridge three words—two, fashion and tradition that we have used commonly and perhaps, carelessly. The third, globalization, that is newer in our vocabularies but so common that it approaches or has become a buzzword.

Before continuing with analysis of these words as concepts and their place in understanding textiles today, I want to compliment the authors of the papers for providing their thoughtful and richly documented examples of textile traditions that emerge from Africa and Asia with impact on other continents. Each author provided in-depth knowledge about a specific textile or related set of textiles: Lutz’s example of Indian cloths prepared for export to West Africa; Akou’s example of West African indigo and mud-dyed cloths Africa; and Daly’s example of Afghan women’s embroideries.

Certainly, the details in their papers along with other examples emerging from the symposium prod us to question what fashion, tradition, and globalization mean. In our own panel, Akou provided an easy launching place for defining fashion and tradition. She points out a discrepancy between Roach-Higgins’ and Blumer’s definitions of fashion. However, consistent in each is the idea that change occurs whether we are consciously aware of it or not. She quotes Blumer who says that a primary response to fashion is seen “chiefly as doing what is believed as the superior practice.” Abandoning that which is no longer superior means changing one’s practice. Even though we may have few disagreements about the role of change in fashion, the problems arise in our use of traditional and tradition in relationship to fashion. The implication is that anything that comes from a tradition and is thus traditional has not, does not, and will not change.

John Picton takes issue with this view. He abandoned the use of traditional because it implies being authentic. In viewing or researching other cultures, Westerners seem to have focused on identifying the distinctive practices that allowed us to classify a textile or a dress ensemble as traditional or authentic. In searching to identify what makes a textile “authentic,” we assume people do not change their practices in other cultures. I suspect that early anthropological writing and use of the “ethnographic present” which did not focus on history and changing practices contributed to this assumption about traditional. In addition, we have made, in the past, assumptions about boundedness of cultures which implies little or no contact with outsiders. Boundedness downplays the influence of trade and borrowing of artifacts and practices. In contrast, each presenter today gives rich detail about influence of outsiders and the permeability of boundaries. In Daly’s paper, the non-governmental organizations encouraged Afghan women to embroider items for tourist consumption without stipulating or judging quality. In Lutz’s paper, the Kalabari asked Madras textile producers to reproduce historic velvets that the Kalabari had sequestered for decades. In Akou’s paper, the example of the Dutch manufacturers imitated Indonesian batiks for the West African market.

Actually, these three papers vividly illustrate that what is now being called globalization has existed as far back in the history of human beings as contact among groups has occurred. Imitating others, borrowing, using, and modifying objects and practices is a human trait. Lutz's paper illustrates a wide variety of such borrowings and modifications that span oceans and centuries. The colonial involvement of the English in India led to textiles being transported and traded throughout the British empire, yet significant changes occurred through the demands of West Africans, in this case, the Nigerian Kalabari customers. Sometimes, changes may not come from customer demands but from the creativity of the artist who responds to changing technology and different resources as Heather Akou indicates. Similarly Daly points to tourist demand for buying something Afghan as being responsible for some old embroidered textiles being cut up and set forth as either a discrete art object (such as medallions) or attached to something else (such as purses or other clothing).

I present these comments to stimulate discussion, although I suspect these comments are like preaching to the converted. I see tradition and fashion as a continuum and have serious questions about what makes a textile or dress ensemble "authentic." In regard to the latter, I don't believe that "authenticity" is based on lack of change, but instead on various elements of style, color, form, silhouette, or technique, some of which may continue as stable and some of which may change. Each of these papers indicates that the researcher does not see fashion and tradition as opposites, but instead as intermingled and on a continuum.

As a concluding comment, I want to point out that the papers in this panel are almost in direct opposition to the preceding panel entitled "Reflecting on the Upper World: Textiles of Heaven and Earth." Presenters and members of the audience for that panel lamented the disappearance of textiles identified, described, and idealized as traditional. A lively discussion could arise by comparing these contrasting points of view.